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HISTORIES OF NATIONS AND BORDERS: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

ABSTRACT

Examining the question of 'which history' of a nation emerges over time and why, this article interrogates the ways in which histories and borders come to acquire symbolic significance and become 'national histories' and 'national borders'. It begins with a thorough analysis of the elements that contribute to and the forces which have an impact upon the development of national identity, national symbolism, and national memory. Then, drawing from a range of examples, it provides serious critical reflection on the work of historians and the nature of the questions that need to be asked in order truly to understand the processes of nation building and identity formation.

KEYWORDS:
borders, nationalism, memory, national history, identity, conflict

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Borders shift. To write a history of the borders in Europe is to write a history of conflict, competition and contestation, be it diplomatically, militarily, or – the subject of this paper – interpretively. For individual border histories themselves can become the subject of conflict: rival interpretations develop regarding the origins of borders, the reasons behind past movements (or stability), the 'meaning' of a border in terms of what it divides (religions, peoples, languages, states), and relations between populations in the area of a border itself and the people on the other side. At stake in the interpretive histories of borders is the nature of the identity of those who have a claim in one or another of these histories, as well as the political implications of where these borders should be.

Similarly to borders, the histories of nations themselves are also often contested from within but without regarding who are members of these nations, what the key identifying factors of a nation are, which events form part of the national story, and how they should be interpreted. For both nations and borders, rival histories are advanced and compete with one another for acceptance as the 'true' history. Sometimes different versions will compete with one another within what Krijn Thijs has called a 'narrative hierarchy', which ranges from 'abstract master narratives to concrete told histories'.[1] The process of 'selection' – from the original interpretation of the history of a nation or a border through to its widespread acceptance by at least one group with a stake in the past – is complex and controversial. This will be the subject of this article, which will cover some basic definitions and examine a series of individual cases of nations and borders as examples of the process of identifying 'which history' emerges. I will advance several critical reflections on this process and the ways in which historians, political scientists and other scholars can and have analysed it. It will begin with some definitions and basic concepts.

WHAT IS A NATION?

This was the question famously asked by Ernest Renan in his speech at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1882.[2] He used quite a few metaphors, including the notion of the nation as a 'daily plebiscite', which refers to the voluntary desire to be a part of a nation that its members need to exhibit. He thereby emphasised the will of individuals to form a nation through identifying with it, with its cultural attributes, with its territory, and with its history.

1 Krijn Thijs, 'The Metaphor of the Master: "Narrative Hierarchy"', in *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, ed. by Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p. 69.

2 Ernest Renan, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', in *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? et autres essays politiques* (Paris, 1992).

Each nation has a past or a history, and for Renan 'forgetting' certain events was every bit as important as remembering others. He thus clearly identified that the process of establishing and defining national histories was one of selection – of choosing to link particular historical events with the nation whilst excluding others. He did not dwell on or analyse the process of selection – how, why or by whom the choice to forget or remember was made – he merely observed that it was 'necessary' for all national histories. Renan also wrote that a nation was 'a soul, a spiritual principle'. By this he meant that nations were more than simply the groups of people that comprised them, that the reality of nations could be felt, and that though they could be described and their histories written, the essence of the nation was something which was invisible. Not only that, a nation was also – if not eternal – above, beyond and more fundamental than the humans who comprised it.

From Renan's late-nineteenth-century understanding of a nation, we can retain the understanding that nations are groups of people who have been identified as sharing some number of objective characteristics (language, culture, religion, or ethnicity, to name a few), who are consciously identified with one another – with some kind of territory – and whose collective history can be written.[3] Not every nation has the same combination of characteristics – some may have a national language, for example, and others not – but all will have some kind of objectively defined characteristics. As stated above, Renan argued that the process by which a nation's history is written is necessarily selective – remembering some things and forgetting others – but this can also be said for other defining characteristics of a nation. A conquered territory needed to 'forget' that it had once belonged to another nation, but so too did minority language speakers need to 'forget' that their immediate forebears (sometimes including parents, or even themselves as children) were not a part of the national language group. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger go beyond Renan's idea of a process of selection and suggest that in many cases national characteristics and elements of national histories are in fact invented.[4] In their book *The Invention of Tradition*, a group of scholars identify how national histories often draw upon and identify with what they call national traditions, but which were in fact simply created later in an effort to portray nations as long-standing and old. Some of the most obvious of the national traditions which can be invented are national holidays, which are designed to give the members of a nation a day off and associate it directly with the nation, or the singing of national anthems,

3 For more definitions, see Timothy Baycroft, *Nationalism in Europe 1789–1945* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), pp. 3–5.
4 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992).

which bring people together in an outburst of patriotism which makes them feel like they are participating in something traditional, even if the anthem was only made 'national' recently. Many traditions are in fact symbols, created or invented in order to provide frames of reference which are 'national'. Here, examples include flags, national animals, coats of arms, uniforms (military, police, etc.), and also monuments built to commemorate a nation's great individuals or moments.

Although the nature of invented traditions varies – just as the objective characteristics used to define them also vary from nation to nation – one thing they all have in common is reference to a national history. Traditions directly imply links to the past, and the choice of national commemorative days or the subjects of national commemorative monuments are indicative of the kinds of choices that Renan described: remembering certain events and leaving others to be forgotten. For the newly unified German Empire in the late nineteenth century, argues Hobsbawm, 'buildings and monuments were the most visible form of establishing a new interpretation of German history'.[5] In this spirit, the choice of 'national' monuments or the large prevalence of figures of Germania helped to create an atmosphere in which the most significant event in the nation's history – if not indeed 'the *only* national historical experience' – was the Bismarckian unification.[6] Similarly, when the French chose to make 14 July their national holiday in 1880, commemorating the storming of the Bastille in 1789, they were choosing to remember a moment of popular revolt and make that the event that would be the most important in their national history of the French Revolution.[7] They could have chosen instead to commemorate the execution of the king (21 January), the September massacre of the enemies of the Revolution (and thus of the French nation), or the foundation of the constitutional and legal principles which would underpin the modern democratic Republic at the Tennis Court Oath (20 June). But they did not. By the twenty-first century, only ardent students of history still remember these other dates (or even events), but everyone still remembers the storming of the Bastille because of the holiday, and so it was that history which became the national one.

Whether specifically historical or simply a part of the cultural makeup and definition of a particular nation, the primary reason that traditions can be invented is that they are fundamentally mythical. To say mythical does *not* mean false, only that reality becomes charged with meaning such that real events, people or places acquire symbolic significance as 'national'.

5 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass Producing Traditions: Europe 1876–1914', in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 274–75.
6 Ibid., p. 276.
7 Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 34.

An individual becomes a national hero; a cultural practice becomes a national tradition; and even a dish of food can acquire mythical and thus 'national' significance when those who sit down to eat it believe or imagine themselves to be in communion with the rest of their nation while they do so.[8] What makes something national is that it serves as a source of identification and identity for the members of the nation. Staying with historical examples, at the battle of Valmy (20 September 1792) the French Revolutionary forces defeated the Austrian army that was invading France with the aim of restoring King Louis XVI to his rightful position. In later (pro-revolutionary) French national histories, it was said that at the battle of Valmy 'the French nation was born' out of the glorious victorious efforts of the people in arms.[9] Such a version of national history is a clear illustration of what it means to say that national histories have huge elements which are mythical, but this is true of all national histories. A history is 'national' because some members of the nation call it 'our' history, identifying personally with the historical events and people described, charging and ascribing symbolic meaning to it. Benedict Anderson called nations 'imagined communities',[10] but it is also true that in this sense national histories are 'imagined histories'. For the nation is imagined because an individual does not know the other members personally, and its history is imagined because individuals did not live through it, but they associate themselves and personally identify with those other people or past events.

The process by which a particular history becomes 'national' – by which certain events become infused with the symbolic meaning identified with a particular nation – is complex. Certainly, the agents of the state play a part alongside the various national elites, but this by no means implies that no contribution comes 'from below'. Peoples cannot simply be made to believe any symbolic association that is put forward: they must be convinced and come to believe it. One thing is certain, though: this is not a 'natural' process, and nations do not simply arise spontaneously and without any effort on the part of nationalists promoting their nation (inventing traditions and producing national histories).[11] Nor do nations exist 'subconsciously' throughout history. The will to be a part of a nation is essential, and it must be conscious, for it is about identity: individuals identify themselves as belonging; the national history is 'their' history; the national characteristics are 'theirs'. As nations, national histories and characteristics are created or invented; they can be presented as having

8 For further examples of this type, see Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).
9 See Timothy Baycroft, *France: Inventing the Nation* (London: Hodder Education, 2008), p. 205.
10 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1991).
11 On this debate from the other side, see Anthony D. Smith, 'Nations and History', in *Understanding Nationalism*, ed. by Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 9–31.

always been there, perhaps needing a national 'awakening', but this is a part of the national story itself – part of the mythical reality that constitutes the nation through the development of its history. Understanding the way in which a national history is written means understanding the history of the development of consciousness, of the formation of and origins of symbolic associations, but not the history of nations.

One of the most prominent ways that national histories are developed or that one particular history emerges as the widely accepted version is through the direct actions of states or those who control them. Perhaps the most obvious means is through the control of school curricula, so that selected versions of history are taught in schools to all future citizens. Another means that has already been alluded to is through the selection of national anthems, holidays, flags and other symbols, and then promoting them so they become more widely recognised and accepted. States can also construct monuments and encourage public ceremonies to commemorate particular moments in history or specific individuals who can be linked to the nation's past. State representatives can also control the spread of other images of the nation and its history, making sure that they appear in places where they simply become the fabric of national life. Examples of this include the images on currency (coins and notes), on postage stamps, and in public places – from village squares to the names of streets, schools, hospitals or other public buildings. In this way, references to the state-promoted version of the national history become a part of the background frame of reference for daily life in ways which are not obvious. This is what Michael Billig called 'banal nationalism', where references to the nation pervade society in little and apparently insignificant ways but add up to the official version of national history that becomes omnipresent in modern society.[12]

In addition to state agents who promote a particular version of national history, others contribute too. Hobsbawm divided these inventing traditions loosely into two groups: the political or official, and the social or unofficial.[13] By social, he meant organisations such as clubs or fraternities whose objectives are not 'specifically or consciously' political. I would contend that while it is true that the process is not always deliberate (or 'conscious'), the promotion of one version of national history always implies a political choice and thus always has a political dimension to it. When analysing the ways in which the past was mobilised in France, Robert Gildea investigated the ways in which what he referred to as collective memory was elaborated.[14] For the purposes of this article, collective memory

12 Billig, *Banal Nationalism*.
13 Hobsbawm, 'Mass Producing Traditions', p. 263.
14 Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994).

is another way to refer to a specifically 'national' history through creating a 'personalised' vision of the past that is referred to by the members of the community as 'our' history. It is memory because it is expressed as a personal (and collective) experience of the past rather than as history, whether individuals' actual ancestors were genuinely there or not. Gildea asserts that such collective memories are constructed 'not objectively' but as a history 'constructed collectively by a community in such a way as to serve the political claims of that community'.[15] In this sense, competing visions of the national past are put forward by those with different political objectives; these might be those already in power – agents of the State using the resources of the State to promote their vision – or they might be in some form of opposition, or representing some kind of social group or strata within a given society hoping to promote their own interests or possibly even take control of the State. Such groups can use similar means – promoting celebrations of alternative dates, using rival symbols or images, celebrating different national heroes – and also things as simple as writing and different histories. Many of these will be compatible or exist for a time in parallel, as some emerge slowly as a selection of images, and events become a part of the more dominant history.[16]

Let us now turn to some concrete historical examples of the kinds of political conflicts which have mobilised alternative versions of the histories of nations. One of the most straightforward and common sorts of conflict is that between a region that is a would-be nation and the nation that claims it to be an integral part of an existing state (sometimes a nation-state, or possibly an empire). Rival histories have been written which particularly use the terms 'region' and 'nation' in such a way as to privilege the political attitudes (separatist or unifying) of the group sponsoring that viewpoint, with all of the attendant different dates, heroes, images and language(s).[17] 'Which history' comes to be successful is the one which emerges alongside the successful political movements, which may be successful (partly) because of their mobilisation of history, though this success can also arise from other factors (military victory being the most obvious), and the resultant national history is a by-product of that success. In this way, a national history of Hungary emerged in the teeth of the centralising narratives of the history of the Austrian Empire, but a national history of Burgundy did not take off against the centralising national history of

15 Ibid., p. 10.
16 Thijs, 'The Metaphor of the Master', pp. 60–74. For an example of alternative versions, see Timothy Baycroft and Lianbi Zhu, 'A Chinese Counterpart to Dominion Day: Chinese Humiliation Day in Interwar Canada, 1924–1930', in *Celebrating Canada*, vol. 1: *Holidays, National Days and the Crafting of Identities*, ed. by Matthew Hayday and Raymond B. Blake (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), pp. 244–74.
17 For examples of this, see *Region and State in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building, Regional Identities and Separatism?*, ed. by Joost Augusteijn and Eric Storm (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012).

France. Maciej Janowski argued that the writing of a national history was a prerequisite for any nation hoping to become 'respectable' and recognised by its neighbours.[18] In some cases, regional sentiment led to would-be national histories being established, even though they remained regions without attaining political independence, such as Catalonia or Brittany. Similarly, what regions to include in a nation can also be contested via national histories. In the pre-unification period in the Germanic states, the nation was defined culturally in terms of language, and yet Austria was not always included by those who wanted a unified Germany to be dominated by Prussia (or at least not dominated by Austria) and who could present Austrian history as distinct from that of greater Germany. Other versions did include Austria and were used by those who wanted to promote 'greater Germany'. Hitler, among others, used such a vision of the past to justify his territorial expansion in all directions, claiming not only Austria but also the Sudetenland, areas of Poland, as well as territory across the Rhine and into France. This is a good example of the use of history, for the Third Reich claimed not only Alsace-Lorraine but also territory in the north of France using an historical argument, claiming that the cultural border between the Germanic peoples and the Latin-speaking peoples should be traced back to that of Lotharingia, a state created following the death of Charlemagne in the early ninth century.[19] For Italy, unified in 1871, Massimo D'Azeglio was famously attributed to have said that 'We have made Italy, now we must make Italians'.[20] The implication was that a series of smaller territories had been brought together, but few cultural ties could be found across the population: the Italian language was almost unspoken, and divergent views of identity and history from region to region meant that a concerted campaign to create a common culture and spread a common vision and identity needed to be undertaken.

Political conflicts over which national history is the true history cover areas not only concerning territory but also alongside more straightforward political conflicts about the nature of society and which political groups should dominate it. Within France, this took on significant proportions across many generations as rival political groups sought to write 'their' history of the entire nation. At a simple level, during the nineteenth century this was about whether or not the French Revolution was a 'good thing' or a 'bad thing'. Republican nation builders wanted a history of France which was the long and inevitable rise of the Republic and the

18 See Maciej Janowski, 'Mirrors for the Nation: Imagining the National Past among the Poles and Czechs in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in *The Contested Nation*, ed. by Berger and Lorenz, p. 442.
19 More will be said in the section on borders, see below.
20 See Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: a Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), p. 153.

triumph of republican values which had always been a part of the French character but which had been suppressed by the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the Catholic Church that supported them. Meanwhile, opponents of republicanism characterised France as fundamentally Catholic throughout history (the 'eldest daughter of the Church'), occasionally plagued by a small minority of agitators who misled the people into outbursts of revolutionary excesses. Presenting French national history as fundamentally secular or fundamentally Catholic – and getting that history accepted (each of these two visions have their accompanying heroes, dates to be commemorated, monuments) – was one of the most significant elements of the political conflict which saw a new regime at each generation throughout the century following the 1789 Revolution.

A similar conflict about 'which history' which has obvious political dimensions is the rivalry between the various national histories on the one hand, and that of the working man's socialist International on the other. Karl Marx overtly claimed that working men should have no country and sought to re-conceive of and re-interpret history in terms of a type of class conflict which spread across and throughout different nations. In this way, the French Revolution was all about the bourgeoisie overthrowing the aristocracy, and nineteenth-century national histories were 'bourgeois' histories which (Marx argued) were there to keep the workers from forming an appropriate (for him) primary class consciousness. The historical interpretive conflict was central to the rise of socialism throughout Europe during the nineteenth century and is exactly the kind of political conflict which lies at the heart of choices regarding 'which history' should be accepted.[21]

When political elites seek to promote a vision of the national collective past with all of its symbolic associations, it does not always work, even when it is an accepted elite that is offering the historical interpretation. Symbols do not always take off, holidays are not always widely celebrated, heroes are not always accepted, cultural practices are not always practiced. In Quebec, as a statement of rejection of Canada, celebrations of the national holiday (Canada Day, 1 July) are often muted; it has become the traditional day to move house for many who overtly ignore the national holiday, even for anti-separatist, pro-Canadian union individuals.[22] In France, the republican government tried to construct statues of the figure called Marianne, the female allegorical incarnation of the Republic, in all of the village squares throughout rural France. These were traditional market squares, and even in mostly republican communities these monuments

21 See Baycroft, *Nationalism in Europe*, pp. 42–50.
22 For more on the ways in which the national holiday traditions were debated and established, see Matthew Hayday, 'Canada's Day: Inventing a Tradition, Defining a Culture', in *Celebrating Canada*, vol. 1, ed. by Hayday and Blake, pp. 274–305.

were rejected as being out of place. In the end, they were put up in village, town and city halls, which, as the seats of local government, were seen as acceptable places for such a new and overtly republican national symbol. Thus, though it is clear that national histories emerge out of the successful political discourses of rival communities, populations do not simply passively accept every element of the 'history' that even victorious political communities put forward: they are a part of the gradual negotiations surrounding which history becomes widespread.

With respect to nations, what we have seen so far is that the answer to the question 'which history?' will be determined by the successful attachment of symbolic, 'mythical' significance to particular events and people to the national story through a process of selection and forgetting. The choices are always political, and although not always deliberate and conscious the national history will for the most part be the direct result of a political community promoting its visions of the national past for politically motivated reasons, 'inventing traditions', and creating associations between the past and the present. There will almost always be conflicting histories which at the very least emphasise different events, where they are not downright contradicting one another as to how the national past should be interpreted. These conflicting visions of the national past grow out of internal political rivalries rather than because of external 'enemies' (though political rivals may of course be presented as traitors or enemies from within by their political rivals), and from these rivalries some versions will prove more successful and enduring. The process by which national histories emerge is therefore not 'natural' or spontaneous (as successful nation-builders would have everyone believe) but is born of political conflict. Mark Hewitson has argued that all nationalism emerges in situations of political conflict and has outlined five sources of conflict in which nationalist arguments (and their historical justifications) may become radicalised:[23] economic dislocation; the process of democratisation; tensions between contiguous, culturally different nationalities; state intervention; and foreign rivalries or wars. In each of these types of conflict, the selection of an associated vision of the national past is often a significant contributing factor. In such situations of conflict, nationalism and the mobilisation of one version of national history will not be restricted to particular types of political groups, for nationalism has at one time or another been successfully combined with just about any other political agenda, be it liberal or conservative, authoritarian or democratic, progressive or reactionary. It is this very flexibility of possible definitions

23 See Mark Hewitson, 'Conclusion', in *What is a Nation? Europe 1789–1914*, ed. by Timothy Baycroft and Mark Hewitson (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp. 312–55.

and potential compatibility with a wide range of political circumstances which make nations and their histories so adaptable and nationalism potentially so powerful as a motivating political force.

At this stage, I want to provide two further critical reflections on this process of the selection and delineation of national histories for scholars and historians. The first is that one needs to be wary of the 'truth claims' of national histories. As it has been shown, national histories, like national cultures or indeed nations themselves, are not false, but their reality and truth are mythical and symbolic and need not be confused with actual history, for which facts can be established with evidence. The evidence of a symbolic reality of association is, after all, simply that people believe it. The second problem for scholars is that when addressing the question of 'which history?', the conclusion that a specific national history will become dominant when it is championed by a political community that becomes successful runs the risk of historical tautology. To say that the political group that 'wins' will have its vision of national history accepted ignores the potential role that historical interpretation may have had in its success in the first place. We do though now write the national histories of nations that emerged successfully, but not of those that lost, and historians can never completely escape this fact. To avoid being historically deterministic, therefore, requires at least an awareness that the choice of 'which history?' is not only political: it also plays a part in the success or failure of political movements. So, the right questions to be asking are what were the different histories on offer, by whom and for what purposes, and how were the different histories themselves involved in the process of conflict resolution?

BORDERS

While the reality and truth of nations can be seen to be mythical, in the realm of the symbolic this is not true for many borders which have a tangible reality as the limits of and places of contact between populations and states. As was seen in several of the examples discussed above, national histories contain an understanding of which a territory (or territories) belong to a nation, and – either directly or by implication – they also contain an understanding of the limits or borders of the nation in question. Although they are not purely myth, as nations are, insofar as they are elements of a national story or a national identity, they do still have a mythical dimension and are put into particular places through human action and human conception. By this I mean that there is nothing 'natural' about a border falling in a particular place, even if it happens to coincide with a feature of

the landscape (such as a body of water, a river or a mountain range), or even with some form of human cultural reality, such as a language. In some versions of the legend of King Arthur, he is turned into a bird by Merlin when a boy, and the lesson he learns looking down from the sky is that the borders which cause wars cannot be seen and are not real.[24] Within national histories, borders are often presented as if they are natural, historic or even eternal, but the limits are simply an integral part of the symbolic association of the national group with its territory. In many cases, national histories include the history of the relationship of the national group with their neighbours across the border (friends, allies, cousins, rivals, subordinates, traditional enemies, …). The selection of 'which history' is more complicated when examining borders in situations in which the two populations or nations on either side of a border do not agree on how it should be interpreted (or perhaps where it should be), particularly in circumstances where borders have shifted over time.[25]

As was seen in the first section, for nations much of the selection process of 'which history' is about the success or failure of particular political positions that associate themselves with one or another of the rival histories, and for the most part this is an internal process. Where there are two nations which disagree about a border, there will be rival successful political interpretations which make a resolution more complicated. When borders have shifted, part of each national history – mythical history – is to assert that a particular place for the border, which may only have been the border at a particular (and possibly quite limited) time, is the 'authentic' or 'legitimate' (or simply the right) one. In practice in many cases, such conflicts have been decided simply by wars, but there is a purely historical dimension as well. Across central Europe, national borders shifted constantly throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nations such as Germany saw their borders regularly shifted, with (as we saw in the first section) historical as well as cultural arguments justifying expansion. As we have already seen, creating histories of nations means ascribing symbolic meaning to past people and events, identifying with them, and claiming them as a part of a national story. In the territory of

24 For one such version, see T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., 1958), pp. 152–75, 192–93.

25 For theoretical, comparative and specific analysis of borders and identity, see Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Routledge, 1999); *Borders, Nations and States: Frontiers of Sovereignty in the New Europe*, ed. by Liam O'Dowd and Thomas M. Wilson (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), Daniel Power and Naomi Standen, *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Stefan Berger, 'Border Regions, Hybridity, and National Identity: The Cases of Alsace and Masuria', in *The Many Faces of Clio. Cross Cultural Approaches to Historiography. Essays in Honor of Georg G. Iggers*, ed. by Q. Edward Wang and Franz L. Fillafer (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 366–81; and Timothy Baycroft, Carolyn Grohmann, and Paul Lawrence, '"Degrees of Foreignness" and the Construction of Identity in French Border Regions during the Interwar Period', *Contemporary European History*, 10.1 (2001), 51–71.

Alsace and Lorraine, the schools taught French and French history up until 1871; however, when they became a part of the newly unified Germany in 1871, this changed and the students began to learn German and German history. This was not only reversed again when the territory came back to France in 1919, but then it changed a further two times in 1940 and 1944 as this territory went back to Germany and then back again to France. A related type of problem associated with shifting borders is the kind of case in which a national hero lived in – or a past event happened in – a place that later came to be on the other side of the border. Staying with the German example, Emmanuel Kant continued to be considered a great German within the national cannon, though he lived his entire live in Konigsberg, which has not been a part of Germany since 1945. Whether that disqualifies him as a great German or not is an example of the kind of political question posed by writing the history of nations and borders. Similarly, events that are claimed by nations that occurred before that particular nation even existed can be problematic. Flemish nationalists claim the battle of the Golden Spurs to be the 'origin' of their nation, even though it occurred several centuries before 'Flanders' had any kind of legal autonomy as a region within the state of Belgium.

A final reflection upon the writing of the history of borders deals with what can be called the 'creative function' of borders in the period since the early nineteenth century. One of the significant changes in what historians call the late modern or contemporary period which began at the end of the eighteenth century was the ever-increasing ability of states to control borders and to influence the populations that live within their territories. One result of this is that they are able to assert their vision of the past and inscribe national symbolism and culture not only on the population but also on the landscape. What this means is that borders can come to take on greater reality on the ground then they ever had before. A good example of this is the area that I have been studying and writing about for the past few decades: the Franco-Belgian border area separating French Flanders from Belgian Flanders.[26] In the early nineteenth-century, this border would have been hard to distinguish, since the populations on either side spoke the same language, built the same sorts of houses, and socialised and inter-married as if the border were not there. By the late twentieth century, not only did these two groups speak different languages, but many elements in the landscape – car licence plates, the colour, shape and name of public buildings or things like mail boxes, the

[26] For the most complete analysis, see Timothy Baycroft, *Culture, Identity and Nationalism: French Flanders in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: The Royal Historical Society Studies in History Series, The Boydell Press, 2004).

symbols on display (flags and so on) and the more recent street names created by urban expansion – had all become easy to distinguish, and the rate of cross-border marriage had dropped to almost zero. In summary, over a century and a half, a border which was originally drawn through the middle of a culturally homogenous region had become the limit of a real cultural division that was felt to be real by local inhabitants and was visible to any outside observers who crossed the border.[27] What this tells us about writing the history of borders which have shifted is that part of the process of selecting 'which history' is determined by which state happens to have control over the territory alongside the border, and how long these people have had to put their national version into the landscape, local culture and the consciousness of the people who live near it.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has presented a series of reflections that scholars need to bear in mind when analysing the histories of nations and borders and asking the question 'which history?'. Because of the mythical and invented quality of nations, and the political implications contained in all potential answers to the question of 'which history?', scholars must not seek simply to understand the 'truth' of national histories or the 'legitimacy' of borders; they should uncover and analyse the alternatives presented by rival political groups (or individuals) with a stake in the answers (to questions about the character of a nation or the place of a border) and explore when, why and how interpretations of a nation's past or its borders gained more widespread acceptance or popularity than others. For what is at stake is why certain events are remembered and others forgotten, as well as how and why certain events or people acquire symbolic (mythical) associations and become 'ours' for certain national groups. Some of the key questions to ask are whose interests are supported by a particular narrative interpretation of the past, and in the context of which conflicts – internal and external, ideological, social, political or economic – did the successful interpretations of the past emerge. This article has drawn together elements from different sorts of scholarship and takes its examples primarily from Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the conclusions are likely to hold anywhere that rival histories have political implications.

[27] For a specific study of the creative function of the border, see Timothy Baycroft, 'Changing Identities in the Franco-Belgian Borderland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *French History*, 13.4 (December, 1999), 417–38.

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